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SUBJECT: Ambassador's Visit to the Kenyan Coast

REF: A) NAIROBI 2567 B) NAIROBI 2449 C) NAIROBI 1832  
D) NAIROBI 2118 E) NAIROBI 2506

1. Summary: The Ambassador's visit to the north-central Kenyan coastal area of Malindi and Kilifi revealed a region buffeted by a host of problems - poor infrastructure, tremendous poverty, narcotics and human trafficking, and environmental degradation - amidst growing tourism. Tourist-related tax revenues flow to the central government and have not been plowed back into the local economy. The indigenous coastal population feels marginalized. The Muslim community in the area is generally regarded as moderate and tolerant, and there is good Muslim-Christian collaboration. Coastal security is a focus of U.S. and Kenyan efforts, but much more remains to be done. End summary.

12. During June 10-14, the Ambassador visited the north-central coastal region of Malindi and Kilifi. This was the Ambassador's fourth visit to the coast since arriving at post nine months ago. The purposes were to: intensify efforts to combat trafficking in persons (ref A); emphasize the importance of conducting transparent and credible elections; explore reports of increased narcotics trafficking; conduct outreach to Muslim and Christian groups; focus attention on coastal security issues; and promote gender equity.

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Tourism, Infrastructure, and Poverty  
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13. Tourism is the most important economic activity in the area, as it is throughout the coast. Malindi generates about 60 percent of the coast's tourist revenue. Luxury resorts dot the coastline. Malindi has a large permanent Italian community, which generates significant income for the area through construction of villas and operation of businesses. The increasing amount of sex tourism and related trafficking is of great concern to local authorities, the private sector, and non-governmental groups (ref A). All realize that sex tourism - and the related issue of narcotics trafficking - could drive away legitimate tourism.

14. The deplorable state of the infrastructure, which limits the potential for expanding tourism to world-class proportions, was dramatically evident during the Ambassador's drive to Malindi from Nairobi. While about two-thirds of the road from Nairobi has been refurbished by the Chinese and EU, the last third of the road, and the road between Mombasa and Malindi, are in deplorable condition. Local officials said that they receive almost none of the tax revenue generated by tourism, which goes to the central government.

15. Another important point of economic note is the harsh reality that the local population does not benefit much from either tourism or industry. Virtually all of the

tourist hotels are owned by foreign enterprises, Coastal Arab and the dominant Kikuyu community of central Kenya owns much of the land. This has led to many locals inhabiting land as squatters, in defiance of Government efforts to protect the "absentee landlords", who are politically well connected.

¶6. One graphic example of marginalization of the local population is evident in salt production. This important activity in the Malindi area is controlled by Arab, Indian, and Kikuyu interests. The intensive manual labor work harvesting the salt from pits is done by a local labor force that is paid about 3-4 dollars a day. The powerful owners have managed to impede any formation of labor unions. (A report of the Kenyan Human Rights Commission in 2005 called attention to these abuses.) Civil society and private sector leaders told the Ambassador that Malindi and Kilifi are the most impoverished areas of Kenya (this claim is also made by leaders in far west Nyanza province and the often forgotten northern half of Kenya). That poverty, they pointed out, forces young girls to drop out of school and engage in illicit sex with tourists as well as encouraging early marriage, which is a tolerated local custom. As a remedy, the community is increasingly working together to promote education. In addition to all these challenges, the region suffers from environmental degradation which is eroding beaches.

¶7. Sadly, the rich history of the Malindi area is poorly preserved. The museum houses a small collection of artifacts. The pillar that Vasco da Gama built when he landed in 1498 still survives, however, as does a small rectangular thatched-roof church that he constructed.

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The old town has not been preserved, though in some spots homes are being rehabilitated in the traditional Swahili style.

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Muslims and Christians  
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¶8. It is important to remember, when discussing the coast, that the population is about evenly divided between Muslims and Christians. Christian leaders noted that, while this is true, Muslims tend to dominate the society because they own most of the businesses and are far wealthier than the Christian community. It's useful to remember that the ten-mile wide coastal strip had at one time been controlled by the Omani Sultanate until the British gained effective control. In fact, at independence, there was serious sentiment on the coast that this strip, given its unique history and identity, should have an autonomous status within Kenya. Also, the British had declared the 10-mile strip royal land. (ref B). The indigenous population of the coast complains that their marginalization is due to secret deals between the British and the Kikuyu leadership that gave huge amounts of local land to that non-coastal tribe at the time of independence.) Muslim influence is also felt through their madrasa schools, which many children attend because of the poor quality of public schools.

¶9. The District Commissioner of Malindi characterized the Muslim community as relatively moderate and quiet with respect to political issues. The Mayor of Malindi noted that the Muslim community cooperates closely with the police on anti-terrorism issues. He indicated that radical foreign preachers sometimes appear in the community, but are quickly marginalized by the local Muslim leadership and the authorities. Christian religious leaders tended to confirm this. They noted that outside radical preachers, especially Pakistanis, evangelize openly, but said that the national Supreme

Council of Muslims (Supkem) is working to control this. Supkem now requires all outside preachers to be authorized by them and by the Council of Imams. Outside influence is also evident from the number of impressive mosques often built with funding from Saudi Arabia and other countries. The Mayor (himself a Christian) urged that more U.S. military civic action programs be carried out in the region, particularly in Muslim areas.

Christians comprise about 60 percent of the population in the Malindi area. Civil society leaders confirmed to the Ambassador that the Muslim community is tolerant and inter-mingled with the Christian community, including through inter-marriage.

¶10. A group of Christian religious leaders told the Ambassador about the Coastal Inter-faith Council. The Council, composed of Christian and Muslim leaders, has been very active in helping resolve conflict situations. They are also working to combat drug abuse and sex tourism.

¶11. The Ambassador visited a technical training institute run by a Muslim community organization. The institute provides vocational training to young men and women, both Muslim and Christian. The U.S. has provided some support. The institute also receives support from a private U.S. group based in Nashville. The Ambassador held a town hall meeting with the students.

¶12. The Ambassador held a frank one and a half hour meeting with 20 Muslim leaders. The general view was positive towards the U.S., with requests that the U.S. do more to support educational and community development projects, and to expand exchange programs. Notably, they expressed interest in obtaining assistance from U.S. military civic action teams. They welcomed news that the U.S. hopes soon to open a consulate on the coast and requested that a U.S. information center (American Corners) be established in Malindi. Only one or two interlocutors sounded negative notes through provocative questions concerning Iraq and Middle East policy. The Ambassador addressed these, and welcomed the frankness of the dialogue. Some concerns were expressed that the U.S. was orchestrating Kenyan anti-terror operations on the coast in which various people had been detained, allegedly illegally. The Ambassador made clear that the U.S. is not orchestrating such actions, and emphasized the U.S. commitment to ensuring respect for the rule of law.

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Coastal Security  
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¶13. The progressive woman District Commissioner of Malindi provided an impressive overview of issues facing the region. We had recently sponsored her visit to the U.S. to help advance our Coastal Security Initiative with the Kenyan government. The coastal security efforts focus on strengthening the Kenyans' ability to police their coastline and borders given the threat posed by terrorist activity stemming from Al Qaeda presence in East Africa. Through a combination of ATA and military assistance, we have provided patrol boats for the navy and police, training for professionalization, and other assistance. The District Commissioner noted that the Office of President Kibaki is providing strong support for the coastal security efforts, and participates in the Coastal Security Working Group. The Mayor of Malindi also demonstrated strong awareness of the priority that needs to be given to security. He is promoting a civic education campaign to increase public understanding of the issue. The Mayor noted the dangerous spillover effect from Somalia, pointing out that Malindi is barely

two hours from Somalia by dhow. He also cited the large amount of illegal firearms entering Kenya by boat from Somalia. The District Commissioner of Kilifi focused on concerns about terrorism. He pointed out that the site of the 2002 Kikambala bombings is only about 20 minutes drive from Kilifi.

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Narcotics Trafficking  
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¶14. All interlocutors cited increased narcotics trafficking as a major problem. While all maintained that those behind the trafficking remain shadowy, they admitted that the spillover from narcotics trafficking has in recent years created a major problem with drug abuse. They noted that, despite assistance that has been provided through the coastal security initiative, security forces have little capacity to interdict small boats that deliver drugs from mother ships (Malindi has no commercial port). (A security plan for the port of Mombasa has been drafted.) The Mayor of Malindi discussed at length his concerns about narcotics trafficking. He said that he has seen families of close friends torn apart by drug abuse. While efforts to stop narcotics trafficking have not been effective, he is encouraged by the public response to the problem. There is a burgeoning effort to educate young people about the evils of drugs. Community elders have formed a group called Malindians Against Drugs. The Mayor appealed for more help to promote awareness and rehabilitation for addicts. The Muslim community is particularly active against narcotics trafficking. The Omari Project, a Muslim-led, highly effective drug rehabilitation program on the coast, receives USAID funding. The District Commissioner of Kilifi also focused on the problem of narcotics trafficking.

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Politics and Gender Equity  
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¶15. Malindi is generally regarded as a pro-opposition area. The Mayor of Malindi, elected to the town council and chosen by them as mayor, was affiliated with the governing NARC coalition but is now considered part of the opposition. He recognized progress made by the Kibaki administration against corruption and in support of economic growth, but also lamented the lack of constitutional reform. He emphasized that Kenya must have a federal system in order to ensure that marginalized areas like Malindi receive fair treatment.

¶16. Some interlocutors claimed that government resources were used to influence the outcome of the recent by-election in the area in favor of the pro-government candidate (refs C & D). One Member of Parliament and two civic leaders who met with the Ambassador - including the subject of these allegations - discussed the campaign and convincingly described broad support for the winner who received more votes than the second and third place candidates together. The MPs also discussed the continuing problem of tribalism in this area of the coast, noting that most of the local conflicts stem from disputes over land ownership, business, and access to grazing and water resources.

¶17. The Malindi District Commissioner commented that President Kibaki appears to be following through on his commitment to make at least one-third of all new government hires women. She said she does not have any problems, as a woman, with the Muslim community.

Peace Corps Programs

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¶18. Several Peace Corps volunteers described to the Ambassador the excellent work they are doing. One is working with the Malindi handicrafts project in successfully identifying markets in the U.S. Another volunteer, a Muslim, is helping a dairy cooperative and has taken the initiative to reach out to the Muslim community. Her positive descriptions of the life of Muslims in the U.S. have proved very enlightening for the local community, she commented.

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Comment  
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¶19. That local officials have a clear sense of the problems they must address and seem determined to do so reflects, in part, the Kibaki government's performance-based civil service reform process (ref B). The resource constraints are staggering, however, and impede effective action. The government's focus on improving coastal security is a bright spot, and U.S. assistance is helping, but much more remains to be done. Doing so is key to helping combat a range of problems: human trafficking, narcotics trafficking, and insecurity with respect to illegal entry of small arms and countering terrorism. Muslims and Christians are united by a strong desire to fight these scourges and determination to overcome the historical marginalization of the area. They appreciate U.S. engagement and are enthusiastically open to more.

RANNEBERGER